

Subject: Cunningham (Rose's column 9-24-10)

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This, the last interview of Edwin Cunningham before his death, was written by columnist Rose Moore and published in Gazette Newspapers on Sept. 24, 2010. Cunningham was 92 years old at the time of the interview and held the record for the longest number of years of service as Sheriff of Lake County--1961 to 1988.

HEADLINE: Memories of the past bring three old friends together

When the old Dinner Bell restaurant at Rt. 84 and Ravenna Road was demolished last fall, I wrote about it. My old friend Connie Luhta read that column, and she got a call from a mutual friend---former Lake County Sheriff Edwin ("Ed") Cunningham.

Ed had read the column too, and he knew the Dinner Bell site had a long-ago connection to Connie's father, the late Karl Naumann. Always an endless and entertaining source of local history, Ed informed Connie that one of her father's Fleet-Wing stations had been located on the Dinner Bell site before the restaurant existed there. Connie hadn't known that.

That gave Connie and me all the excuse we needed to plan a visit together to the former sheriff. We were long delayed by one thing or another, but a week ago---at last!---we stopped to see Ed at his home.

ED IS THE MAN WHO still holds the record for the longest number of years of service as Sheriff of Lake County---1961 to 1988. That's 27 consecutive years. He is now 92 years old and has long been out of that office, but his mind, humor and social skills remain sharp.

He and Connie and I have some things in common. We were all raised in Painesville and we're all Harvey High School graduates---(Connie in 1948, when there was still a Champion Junior High on the campus; Ed in 1936, when the high school building torn down this spring was just over a decade old; and I in 1958, when my classmates and I were sure that building would be around forever). All three of us retain fond memories of the city in which we grew up, albeit at different points in time.

In our visit with Ed, Connie found yet another connection with her father's history with Fleet-Wing stations. Ed informed her that, in his younger years, he had actually painted one of those stations!

Those were the days when Painesville, like many towns, boasted a gas station as well as a neighborhood grocery store on almost every block. It was also a time when gasoline cost 18 cents a gallon... when cars were growing more and more popular... when the phrase, "Romance of the Open Road," was coined.... and when traffic jams were rare and driving was fun!

Connie was a senior chemist at Standard Oil in the days when Fleet-Wing became known in the industry as the "jobber brand of Sohio." This was because Fleet-Wing stations were run by independent businessmen who purchased their gasoline from Sohio. Her father ran the well-known Lake County Oil Company. He also owned Geauga Oil Company and had stations in that county as well.

I listened as Connie and Ed clicked off a list of Fleet-Wing locations in Lake County, including a station in Willoughby; and in Painesville, one on the corner of Grant and Mentor Avenue, one at what would later be the site of the Dinner Bell; one at Erie Street... "There were at least five," Connie noted.

The mention of the Erie Street station rang a bell for me. I was a high-school freshman when a friend and I were hired by Karl Naumann during Halloween, to don costumes and greet his customers with special bonus tickets for the purchase of gasoline.

Connie recalled that the building that housed that particular station had formerly been the first Lake County Jail. "The bottom area was rented to Hemphill's for their first travel and insurance company office," she told us. "The upper floor was used for offices, but my father used the most easterly upper room, which had been an all-metal jail cell, as a safe. He kept the station money there."

ED'S DECLARATION that he had once painted that building was news to us, though his listing of some of his pre-sheriff jobs hadn't surprised us.

I had long remembered him as "Ed Cunningham the businessman," for instance. He and his family had run a successful second-hand store which I passed daily as a child. Anyone who passed this store, (even a child like myself), would earn a smile and a wave from Ed.

And since Ed had come of age at the proper time to serve in World War II, it was no surprise to hear him say he had served our country with the U.S. Navy, 1942-46. "I sit here and try to remember the names of my old Navy shipmates," he said. "When I think of a name, I write it down so I won't forget it next day... Some of us have tried to stay in touch..."

An early job description that did surprise us, however, was that, in his youth, he had been employed as a milk-bottler at Sidley's Casement Avenue dairy. That set us to talking about Painesville's "Dairy Row" on State Street, and Ed recalled Ideal Dairy's early horse-and-buggy deliveries to Painesville homes; he also remembered buying a full gallon of skimmed milk for a dime.

That led, in turn, to memories of an ice company on Liberty Street. That company's truck ran up and down the city streets delivering ice to folks who still had old-time refrigerators cooled with blocks of ice (hence the name "ice box"). We remembered this "ice man" driving down our streets on hot summer days, chipping off splinters of ice from the blocks and tossing them to kids. It wasn't ice cream, but it was refreshing and cool. And free!

We talked as well about a sad period many of us have never forgotten---the arrival of the federal urban "renewal" projects that gutted so many American towns and spelled the end for many of our downtown businesses---the Cunninghams' store among them.

Ed recalled the beginnings of his family's store. A man named George Bay had a storage business on Jackson Street, and Ed's father had a vacant building. (Bay was the Bay Cabinet family, which manufactured the first storm windows made in the area).

George Bay would store an excess of items at the Cunninghams' vacant building. When a customer defaulted on rent, the items were sold, and they always seemed to move fast. Deciding this second-hand business was good, the Cunninghams went into the business themselves, and they prospered until 1963, when the demolition crews began chewing away at Painesville's busy downtown.

"Ed went to City Hall on behalf of his family. "I told them it was a shame to tear down the Cunningham Building. It was built by Payne & Beamer in 1927, and it was a strong building. They didn't believe me; they were sure it was much older, but I was a boy when it was built, and I remembered it... We had to sell, of course; we were given no choice. Losing the building was very hard on my father... ."

BY THIS TIME, Ed was the sheriff of Lake County, and it seems he was meant for the job. His business acumen served him and the county well financially, and his training methods for deputies were just as successful. At least 14 of his deputies ended up later as law enforcement chiefs in other places, and Ed would never lose his pride in their successes.

But what had led Ed to to consider running for sheriff in the first place? "I went to a sheriff's auction," he replied. "Paul Cage was sheriff then, and I asked what he did in his job. He told me he mostly handled the sheriff's auctions, and I decided I could do that!... I ran for sheriff in 1956; I didn't get beat badly, but I didn't win," he said with a grin. (He did win the next time, and many times thereafter).

Connie, a township trustee, laughingly responded with an election story of her own. "I ran three times and lost!" she said. "I didn't have a reverse gear, so I just kept going!" (That was a number of elections ago, and she is still a Concord Township Trustee).

Our course of conversation moved to memories of the old "Painesville Hospital" (as we called it in our younger days). Connie remembered when it was still the big square building that had been the "Old Reynolds Place," before the various expansions. We all recalled a nurses' residence in a graceful building on the east portion of the property. That house, long gone now, had been designed and built by Jonathan Goldsmith.

We talked of a hill behind the hospital, where children happily sledded in winter, and their noise didn't seem to be an issue. We remembered the tall metal stand-pipe, with rocket-like dimensions, on the south side of High Street. It stored water for firefighting; and kids (Ed among them) liked to ski down the slope on which it stood.

AS THE AFTERNOON wound down, Connie and Ed traded a few stories. "I remember coming home to Painesville on a 30-day leave from the Navy," Ed told her. "Your father asked, 'How long are you going to be home?' When I told him, he handed me a long strip of gasoline ration coupons for my car... I didn't even have a car!"

In turn, Connie reminded him of a time many years ago, when she left Morley Library and realized she'd locked her keys in her car. "I saw you there in the library and told you my problem, and you asked if I had another set of keys at home. I did, and you told me you'd just drive me home for those keys, and you did." We were all amused at that small memory of a simpler era when it wasn't unusual for a citizen

to take such a problem to the sheriff; nor was it unusual for a sheriff to solve the problem directly himself.

It was time to head home, and on impulse, I decided to photograph Ed. He was looking good for his years, and I wanted to record this. "Do you mind?" I asked. He looked up, and a smile crossed his face as he asked, "Do you remember Barbara Fritchie?"

Not thinking of the Civil War Unionist made famous in a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, I said no. Whereupon, Ed Cunningham declared theatrically, quoting the famous words from the Whittier poem: "Shoot if you must this old gray head, but spare your country's flag."

We burst into laughter; I had his permission, and I left with my treasured photo.

It was a good afternoon for us all, I think.